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July 23, 1990

Further notes (starting from beginning) suggested Thomas G. Paterson and William J. Brophy: "November Elections: The Cuban Missile Crisis and American Politics, 1962", Journal of American History, Vol. 73, #1, June 1986, 87-119.

p. 87: "I told you that the President would move on Cuba before [the] election," Sen. Norris Cotton of New Hampshire reminded his constituents a week after President John F. Kennedy had dramatically announced that the United States was imposing a quarantine against Cuba to force Soviet missiles from the Caribbean island. Another Republican standing for reelection in 1962, Rep. Thomas B. Curtis of Missouri, told voters in his district that the Cuban missile crisis was 'phony and contrived for election purposes.' Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, like many others, suspected that the Kennedy administration had played politics with foreign policy to help Democrats in the congressional elections of November 6."

[GET REFS IN FOOTNOTE]

[from now on, instead of quoting, I will put footnote marks in the margin and refer to these in the file; I will either xerox the passages to include with the file or fill them in later]

Thus, Republicans like Norris Cotton were expecting from Kennedy an "October Surprise."

That is the term used by an opposition party referring to a feared or expected foreign policy move by an incumbent administration timed and designed to help win an election. In particular, Reagan in 1980 feared either a new hostage raid on Iran or a deal to release the hostages by Carter, just before the election. Both fears were well founded, though the planning for a second raid seems to have been cancelled by late summer, probably because descriptions of it, possibly distorted, were leaked by anti-Carter elements in the government and published.

Reagan even had a high-level team under Casey and Richard Allen working as the "October Surprise Group" to monitor, foresee and forestall such a deal. Allegedly, it succeeded (according, for instance, to Brenneke), persuading the Iranians to postpone a release that was on the verge of being negotiated on the basis of a promise for much larger arms aid (largely via Israel) than Carter had agreed to.

Both the fear and the secret, non-governmental negotiation followed in the footsteps of Richard Nixon, who feared that LBJ would announce the opening of negotiations with North Vietnam just before the elections, and end the bombing: as LBJ did do. Hersh found later that Nixon had regarded this move as a "day of infamy" which almost lost him the election; he deliberately scheduled his "November Ultimatum" the next year to reopen the bombing of North Vietnam on November 1, the anniversary of the suspension of bombing

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by LBJ. He planned (if Hanoi did not accept his terms) to win the war in Vietnam brutally on the anniversary of LBJ's perfidious near-success in denying him office.

Again, Richard Allen was involved in the intelligence effort against the administration on this, getting inside word from Henry Kissinger, among others. And again, there was private communication to a foreign head of state--Anna Chennault, among others (possibly Vann! though Vann may have done this on his own) to Thieu--urging him to refuse to take part in negotiations proposed by the President, in the interests of prolonging a war the President desired to settle.

(This particular instance seems to have major elements to support a serious legal charge of treason. Meanwhile, the families of some Iranian hostages are preparing a civil suit against Reagan and Bush--who were not officials at the time--for prolonging the captivity of their relatives).

The LBJ Administration had an "August surprise" for Goldwater in 1964. There was, in fact, much more to their intended use of the supposed Tonkin Gulf Incident and the resulting Tonkin Gulf Resolution than swelling LBJ's expected landslide in November. The Administration had a "February surprise" for the public up its sleeve for after the election, the intense planning for which, in which I represented the Office of Secretary of Defense on the first day, commenced on Election Day.

But no one in the Administration doubted that one of the obvious incentives for seizing the occasion for this first act of bombing against North Vietnam ("in reprisal" for what was at best an equivocal--in fact, it was later clear, a non-existent--attack, which on August 3 and 4 the US was consciously going very far to provoke) was its beautiful political consequences in boxing Goldwater in on one of his main campaign themes, essentially eliminating from the campaign his claim to be a more forceful (if not more prudent) manager of violence in pursuit of US interests.

What the Republicans presumably feared in the fall of 1962 was exactly the kind of initiative, with the identical political meaning and effects, that LBJ pulled off in August, 1964, 22 months later.

The team advising LBJ and executing his decisions in 1964 on this issue was almost identical to the one that served JFK in October 1962: McGeorge Bundy, Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Maxwell Taylor (the main person missing, aside from JFK, was his brother; LBJ himself had been a member of ExCom in 1962, and not at all, the transcript shows, its most hawkish member). What the Republicans feared from this team in 1962 was what they got in 1964.

The Republicans themselves were, of course, calling for forceful action and taunting the President for not delivering it: just like Goldwater in '64, the attacks on Carter in '80 for

letting the Iran hostage raid fail, and more recently (not in an election year) the Democratic taunting of George Bush for not backing up a coup attempt against Noriega in October 1989, taunts which led directly to Bush's invasion of Panama in December. As the Panama example shows particularly clearly, such challenges to the manliness and decisiveness of a President, made largely for domestic political advantage, have tragic consequences for many who cannot vote in the US. Their fear, then, was that he would take that issue away from them and even use it against them: by doing what they asked, arguably more or better than "their man" would have done, and successfully.

What Paterson and Brophy did not know in 1986 was what James Hersherberg first revealed in 1987 and more extensively this summer: that Kennedy and McNamara had ordered and were monitoring closely plans and physical preparations for possible attacks on Cuba on a very unusually urgent basis, with maximum readiness ordered for October 20. The orders were given in late September and early October, two weeks before the Soviet missiles had been revealed in photography (and before the most credible reports of missiles, which led to the scheduling of the U-2 flight which located them).

(It is an interesting question just when Cotton made his prediction to his constituents? Was it, for example, before October 10, when Keating first asserted the presence of land-based missiles? (I suspect so). Could there have been a leak to Cotton or others of these politically consequential plans and preparations? At lower levels, a fair number of people in the Navy and Air Force could have known of physical preparations being made; and the large-scale, publicly-known maneuvers rehearsing an invasion might have seemed more suggestive of intent to Republicans, as to Russians and Cubans, than they ever did to scholars sympathetic to the Administration.)

It is not clear from the Paterson/Brophy (P/B) account in just what sense Republican hawks thought, after the event, that Kennedy had "contrived" the crisis that actually came transpired, for political benefit, or indeed, how he had "played politics" with it as Goldwater claimed. Unlike some doves, they didn't question that the Soviet deployment merited or even compelled blockade and the threat of attack, and most of them thought that he hadn't been forceful enough in his demands or in failing to attack and overthrow Castro. Just what did they suspect? (I need to check the references on this).

It would be very hard to construct a case that Kennedy did want or could have wanted the crisis that he got (however beneficial it turned out to be for him politically, in the event): i.e., that he wanted--or might conceivably have wanted, if the thought had occurred to him--the Soviets to send land-based missiles secretly to Cuba, in defiance of his public warnings and what he had taken to be their private assurances.

Once that unforeseen, politically ghastly situation had

emerged, guaranteeing him a domestic political crisis no matter what he did, I argue elsewhere that he did have a choice as to whether to define it and make it as well a national security crisis, involving threats of war between nuclear powers. (The Soviet move in itself posed no such threats, though it was likely to evoke the war crisis that it did: essentially, I would argue, for political reasons. Why the Soviets moved in spite of this likelihood--why, as it now appears, they failed to foresee it--was then and remains one of the great mysteries of the crisis, which I hope to illuminate).

In this situation, which I would judge Kennedy did not want or foresee (despite more internal consideration of the possibility than has ever been revealed), Kennedy did choose a war crisis, extending at least to the blockade, an unprecedented act of war against a nuclear power.

(I am not sure I have ever seen this characterization of the blockade before. If the Soviets had forbidden air traffic to Berlin as well as blocked ground traffic in 1948, that would have been the precedent! But I don't want to press the point unduly that the Soviet blockade of ground traffic across East Germany was not comparable, whatever the legalities.

Interestingly, that Soviet blockade had evoked for the first time in the postwar era--discounting Truman's claims about Iran in 1946--a tacit American threat of nuclear first-use, in the form of the first deployment of what were publicly described as "nuclear bombers" to Britain. Truman and his advisors believed this implicit threat had been critical to prevailing in the situation, encouraging them to institutionalize such threats in their policy planning.)